A Boost for Caldwell

Tuesday, January 15, 2008
Elizabeth Moore
Staff Writer
Star-Ledger

CALDWELL -- In the two years since residents formed the Caldwell Downtown Alliance, they've decorated shop windows for the holidays, published a walking guide to the area and met with a local college and museum to forge partnerships on improving the business district.

"I would like it to be a thriving center for the West Essex area," said Mayor Susan Gartland, of Caldwell's downtown. "I'd like to keep the people who come into town for a specific store -- I'd like to be able to keep them there."

The hard work the alliance has done recently earned them a spot in the state's Main Street program. State Department of Community Affairs Commissioner Joseph V. Doria Jr. will join town officials at a ceremony Friday at 4 p.m. at the Caldwell Community Center.

Since the state began the Main Street program in 1990, New Jersey communities have received help revitalizing their downtowns -- everything from bringing in new stores to sprucing up street signs and energizing volunteers.

South Orange, Westfield and Boonton were previous Main Street designees, while Orange, Montclair and Caldwell are recent admissions, bringing the total number of Main Street communities in the state to 32.

"We want to enhance the economic value of a downtown and preserve its historic flavor," said Jef Buehler, state coordinator of the Main Street program. He said the program has a 25-year track record and tries to improve communities four ways -- by enhancing its physical appearance, its civic and social events and ultimately, its economic development.

West Orange was one of the first Main Street designees and Planning Director Susan Borg said the state program has helped with everything from designing the downtown space to helping new businesses with their finances.

"There's a lot of training that goes with that program, it also brings experts to the town," she said.

Caldwell Councilman Peter Mescia has spearheaded the formation of his community's downtown alliance and said the Main Street partnership is what the group has been striving for.

"It's a big deal for the town to be recognized," he said. "It's a compliment for all the hard work volunteers have put in."

This year, volunteers will have the chance to attend Main Street workshops at the state's expense and hear from experts on community organization and an action plan for their downtown.

At the end of the year, the Caldwell program will be re-evaluated and Buehler said the town could seek a higher designation that would provide help with street signs and the interior design of stores.

Recently, Caldwell College got involved with the downtown improvement program. Joseph Savage, vice president of institutional advancement development at Caldwell College, said his

campus recently hosted a group of around 20 merchants, who met with students and offered coupons to show them what the downtown area had to offer.

He said having a safe and thriving downtown was a benefit to the college when it comes to recruiting students.

"Colleges do better when they have a positive relationship with their downtown," he said.

Work on the downtown has also received a thumbs-up from merchants, who say they notice some improvements are being made. Lisa Smith, owner of Smith & Co., a gift shop that opened last fall, said shoppers are coming to her store from as far away as Montclair.

"They're getting that the town is trying to turn things around," she said.

Ryan Dorchak, co-owner of the Cloverleaf Tavern, said he's seen some improvements, but said there are still things that can be done to draw in customers, "Parking has been an issue. I'd like to see some parking changes and they should limit the type of stores in town. It would be nice to see a little more variety."

Changes are continuing in the area -- a new Italian bakery and food store is expected to open later this year, a renovation to a synagogue on Bloomfield Avenue is underway, and a new bistro is slated to open at the corner of Smull and Bloomfield Avenues.